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ABROAD AT HOME | Anthony Lewis

A Choice, Not an Echo

WASHINGTON
Any President has the political advantage in his ability to frame issues for decision. A President as articulate as Ronald Reagan, and as determined as he is on the issue of Nicaragua, has an enormous momentum going for him.

Those who oppose military aid to the contras, moreover, tend to be put on the defensive by the way the issue is framed. The Sandinistas have been painted in progressively more devilish terms: leftists, Marxist-Leninists, Communists, Stalinists. To oppose a war against them is to be weak, soft on communism, unpatriotic.

But there is no reason in fact for any politician to be embarrassed or defensive about opposing aid to the contras. Opposition is in the centrist, the moderate tradition of American politics, supported by history and tough realism. It is the President who is on the extreme edge, asking the country to follow him into fantasy, into an adventure marked for disaster.

Bruce Babbitt, the Governor of Arizona, put the realities plainly in a recent article on this page. He is a centrist Democrat from the Southwest, a man often described as a potential Presidential candidate who would appeal to conservatives.

The contras "are not democrats," Governor Babbitt said, "either by conviction or by popular support." They have never held an inch of Nicaraguan territory, and they have no chance of winning "with any level of U.S. aid." And the effect of their terrorist war is anti-democratic: "They allow a repressive, unpopular regime to wrap itself in the flag and justify 'emergency measures.'"

The entire Reagan policy stands on a premise that defies reason and experi-

Will Congress resist the contra hype?

ence. It is that the United States should use force to overthrow unfriendly leftist governments in this hemisphere.

The lessons of experience on that score are so overpowering that it is hard to understand how conservatives, of all people, can ignore them. In Guatemala a C.I.A. coup produced 30 years of right-wing military dictatorship and mass murder. The Bay of Pigs solidified Fidel Castro's rule in Cuba.

Of course there was Grenada, and there is Rambo. From such has Mr. Reagan woven his fantasy of military victory in the swamps of Nicaragua. We are going to win by giving \$100 million to a gang that can't shoot straight — "an army dominated by Somocistas and adventurers," as Governor Babbitt put it.

Another centrist Democrat, Senator John Glenn of Ohio, also put the issue in political context. In a letter to constituents a while ago he said he regretted having been "defensive" in opposing the Reagan policy in Nicaragua. He was sorry he had begun a speech by saying, "No one is more anti-Communist than I am, but . . ."

"Americans," Senator Glenn said, "should not feel they need to prove they love their country before they can criticize policies they think are wrong. Americans should not feel that opposing a President in some way casts doubt on their patriotism."

The public has not bought the Reagan arguments on Nicaragua, as White House political aides themselves say. Americans know instinctively that \$100 million in aid is not going to turn the contras into winners, political or military. They worry that after aid, and now we are told U.S. advisers, will come a demand for U.S. forces.

To the arguments of realism the Administration replies with the oldest of Presidential stratagems. That is to say: We have secret intelligence that would persuade you if only you were allowed to see it.

The claim that war is necessary in Nicaragua to save the other fragile democracies of the region, for example, is exploded by the attitude of those very democracies. They have called for an end to the contra war — for regional negotiation instead. They regard U.S. military intervention as a far more serious destabilizing threat than the existence of a left-wing government in Nicaragua.

To that the Administration can say only that Latin leaders speak differently "in private." It gives a similarly feeble explanation of the frequently attested brutality of the contras. President Reagan says he has "intelligence" showing that Sandinistas have dressed up as contras to carry out those rapes and murders.

To resist arguments so feeble and so dangerous is not to be weak or soft. It is to understand that diplomacy, negotiation and agreement with our friends are more effective ways to democracy and stability in Central America than a U.S. war in Nicaragua. The question now is whether members of the House and Senate will be able to resist the strident language of President Reagan and stand up for the alternative of reason. □